

C. The Borneo Finds

TOM HARRISSON

[Mr Harrison's informal presentation of the wares discovered in Borneo was richly augmented by actual examples in the form of sherds, giving rise to considerable discussion. His pre-Symposium abstract is given here.]

The inland Dayak tribes of Borneo have long been known to treasure ancient stoneware jars, imported from the Asian mainland and traded into the far interior over centuries. Many of these resemble similar native treasure of hill peoples in the Philippines and Celebes. But to date it has not been easy to classify most of these—for instance the abundant brown dragon jars or plain honey-coloured pots made over long periods at kilns on the mainland specializing in exporting them.

In the past decade, however, the problem has been considerably clarified—*within* Borneo at least—by the discovery of rich ceramic import centres in the Sarawak River delta (S.W. Borneo): 300 miles further north around and inside the Great Caves of Niah; north again at Kota Batu, the pre-European capital of the Sultanate of Brunei; and last year on small islets round Labuan in North Borneo. Some 2,000,000 sherds and a series of perfect pieces have been excavated in stratified sites and are now available for study in the Sarawak Museum at Kuching.

All sites in the south-west (6 well excavated; over 20 more located) are Sung or earlier. No Ming material—for instance, not one piece of 'blue and white'—has been found in these rich trading centres, scattered along 50 miles of coast and swampland in this sector. Further north, small amounts of Ming porcelains and Siamese Sawankalok-Sukothai stonewares begin to appear; by the time Brunei is reached, the Ming element is very powerful and rich also (and increases further into the Philippines).

Typologies, dateable by these excavations, do relate prehistoric trade and culture contacts out of Siam, Indo-China and China, south and south-eastward into and through Borneo, from at least *c.* A.D. 700 onward—until the advent of European influence, in the 16th century, cut these massive barter-routes.

Of particular interest is the wealth of 'export' wares from Borneo, still little known elsewhere—such as green stonewares related to the Tradescant Jar at Oxford; whitish crackled wares identical with the Marco Polo Pot in the Treasure of St. Mark's at Venice; and polychrome pieces similar to the historic crayfish at the Upsala Museum in Sweden. Borneo material may also help to clarify sources and export routes of other related wares (coarse *temmoku*, Tzuchou 磁州 [Hopei], massive Sung celadons, Cambodian pieces) in Southeast Asia.

COMMENT

Mr Harrison's remarks, supported with sherds from Santubong delta sites and the Niah caves (including new material found from the 1961 season) provide ample

evidence that there had been major pre-Ming trade between China and Southwest Borneo. In this connection, the speaker recalled the fact that Alastair Lamb had also found pre-Ming sites in Malaya.

Previous to his talk, Mr Harrison, and this rapporteur, made careful studies of the sherds in comparison with whole pieces in the Academy's collection. The resulting inference was inescapable, that wherever direct similarities could be established, the applicable dating was usually in correspondence with T'ang or Sung. In at least one case—a fragment of what appeared to be a Yüeh 越 jar (a sizeable sherd with two intact loop handles and the neck profile and body-swell still clearly indicated), the closest correspondence was with that body of Yüeh ware generally attributed to the 4th–6th centuries, i.e. roughly the period of the Six Dynasties. Other of his Yüeh (or Yüeh-like) sherds bore every indication of a T'ang or earlier date.

The sherds could be grouped into seven main categories. Aside from the Yüeh types these were: Tzuchou, with heavy bodies and underglaze designs in brown or black; 'Ying-ch'ing' 影青 (Ch'ing-pai 青白), thin-bodied, usually jointed, and with the clear bluish glaze typical of the ware; a somewhat heavier bodied white ware with 'scratched' designs, which Mr Harrison equated with the so-called 'Marco Polo' jar in the Treasury of St. Mark's, Venice; typical examples of celadons, with indications of incised or moulded lotus petal designs on the exterior; a group of fairly rough stoneware fragments with vitreous yellow or brown glazes; and finally a group of thin, buff coloured stonewares frequently green-glazed over a pattern moulded in the clay.

Almost exact correspondences with accepted Sung (or immediately post-Sung) types of Tzuchou, 'Ying-ch'ing', and the celadons could quickly be pointed out, provoking no discussion. The remaining types had a contrary effect.

The 'Marco Polo' wares are very abundant in Southwest Borneo. However, it must be borne in mind that the tradition which connects the so-called 'Marco Polo' pot in Venice with that traveller-adventurer is open to question. Its presumed dating, according to this tradition, is therefore unreliable. Of greater importance than any possible association with the Venice piece, it seemed to those attending, was the evidence of the sherds themselves as being closely similar to that large body of white-glazed wares (as yet incompletely identifiable with particular kiln-sites) which are datable to Sung (or Yüan?) times with a fair degree of accuracy on the basis of their form and decoration. Each of the sherds, although generally 'white-glazed', had bluish or greenish tints to the glaze, making their association with that large body of materials customarily grouped together under the loose heading of 'Ying-ch'ing' very tenable. The fact of the matter is that 'Ying-ch'ing' was made in a number of kiln sites, over a long period of time. The Borneo finds may prove to be most important in enabling the scholar to arrive at more accurate classifications within the general type.

Of all aspects of Mr Harrison's report, the greatest amount of discussion was given over to the thin-bodied, green-glazed wares which are persistent in the South Borneo sites, although in small amounts. It was the speaker's contention that they are relatable to the historic Tradescant Jar in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, and it was particularly interesting to the participants that the Academy had recently acquired a similar jar, found in the Ryūkyūs, making direct comparison possible.

Little is known about the dating of the jars of Tradescant type except, for the obvious fact, that the Ashmolean example must be Ming or earlier because of the circumstances under which it came to that museum. They are most frequently thought to be probably of South Chinese manufacture, the date usually associated with them being 'circa 16th century'.

The Tradescant jars would seem to belong properly to that large class of water or storage jars, made in China for the trade and (as pointed out by Dr Gustav Ecke at the Symposium) rarely, if ever, to be found within China itself. Very little more is known about them; and it is highly likely that the methods of manufacture and the designs, which had proven to be popular in the trade, were repeated, without perceptible change, over a period perhaps amounting to centuries.

The fact that the green-glazed materials were found in the Niah cave site would certainly seem to indicate an early dating for the sherds themselves. It was not generally agreed upon, however, that it could therefore be proven that there was a wide range of early Chinese wares from which 'such advance "Ming-looking things" might have developed at an early stage', thus indicating a pre-Ming date for the Tradescant family itself; there was insufficient evidence as yet to connect the sherds with the advanced type represented by the Academy's Tradescant jar. It was suggested by more than one in attendance that the term 'Tonkinese' might be more appropriate for these particular sherds. It is to be hoped that an opportunity may present itself for a more intensive comparison of the Borneo samples with wares of established Indo-Chinese provenance in such collections as that of the Musée Cinquantenaire in Brussels, for example.

Mr Harrisson's talk closed with a plea for better communication between investigators and a promise to make sherds from the Borneo sites available to interested institutions. Many of the sherds discussed were given by him to the Honolulu Academy of Arts, for which the Museum is profoundly grateful. Mr Harrisson also mentioned the great numbers of trade beads found in Borneo, and expressed his hope that a typology of beads might one day be forthcoming.

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